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The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

No. 0 OCTOBER 18, 1939

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DEAR X,—I know that I could hardly hit on a worse opening for a News-Letter than to start by explaining that it is issued under the auspices of the Council of the Churches on the Christian Faith and the Common Life. The thought of organisation leaves most people cold, and for some at least whose interest we want to enlist any mention of the Churches is an unpromising beginning. But the purpose of the Council which was set up by the Churches in this country last year is one which I believe you will recognise to be necessary and important. Its task is to bridge the gulf which exists at present between organised religion and the general life of the community. A centre has been created which has links not only with the various activities of the Churches but also with many individuals and organisations outside them. Its existence makes possible much which there was no means of attempting before.

WHY A CHRISTIAN NEWS-LETTER?

The first reason is that a grave situation calls for new concerted action. The present century has witnessed within what was once know as Christendom the vehement repudiation of the Christian tradition and a deliberate attempt to establish a post-Christian world. Among ourselves the creeds of the Churches have for very many, and in particular for large sections of youth, ceased to have any living meaning. The pact between Nazism and Communism has disappointed and disillusioned many who saw in one or other of these faiths the salvation of mankind menaced by a life and death struggle with the other.

The situation is crowded with danger, needs and opportunities. If an adventurous Christian faith is to bring hope and renewal to a decaying civilisation, the first thing to be done is to pool our available resources of Christian understanding and insight. The way has been prepared for this by active discussion which has been taking place for some years between Christian thinkers in this and other countries regarding the fundamental problems of modern society. Stock has been taken of the situation. The work already begun needs to be extended and deepened in view of the clamant issues raised by the war.

A Christian News-Letter provides a means by which this common thinking may be made available to a wider public. Plans are also being made for the publication, in close association with the News-Letter, of a series of small books in which particular subjects can be treated with greater fullness. An announcement about these will be made later.

The second reason for embarking on this venture is the evidence that comes from many diverse quarters of a real need which may be met to some extent by the personal link of a News-Letter. People are baffled, perplexed and deeply distressed. Many will welcome an opportunity of association in a common effort to discover the Christian meaning of the experiences through which we are passing and the Christian response which is demanded of us.

OUR COLLABORATORS

The chief reason why I find myself unexpectedly in the position of editor of this News-Letter is that the nature of my work for many years has enriched me with a large number of friends of different outlook and different types of experience. They have responded with the utmost readiness to my request for collaboration. This is a better augury for success than any qualities that I can bring to the task.

The impressive list of names which appears on the preceding page is not a list of benevolent patrons. Each has given a definite promise to contribute actively to the common thinking that will provide the contents of the News-Letter. Those who are co-operating with us are by no means agreed in all matters, and they will certainly not all concur in everything that appears in its pages. But they are at one in believing that we have much to learn from one another and in their willingness to put their special gifts of knowledge and experience at the service of the News-Letter.

WHAT IS MEANT BY A NEWS-LETTER?

Our main concern will be with the big news rather than with the latest news. It is the large, significant happenings that we shall try to understand and interpret. A large part of our space will be devoted to supplying information about the changing situation and the constructive attempts to meet the multitudes of new needs which these changes create. We shall take note of Christian life, thought and work on the Continent of Europe and in America, Asia and Africa. All this will be subordinate, however, to the central purpose of understanding the *meaning* of what is happening in the light of the Christian faith, outlook and values.

OUR PROGRAMME

The News-Letter will consist each week of two sheets. The one will be a letter written by myself, though the material will come from many sources. It will include

brief comment on a variety of events and topics. I expect a great deal of the material for this sheet will before long be supplied by readers of the News-Letter. I hope to receive from them a mass of live information, comment and criticism which will make the letter a far more interesting document than any individual could produce.

The second sheet will consist of a single article on a topic of outstanding interest. This will usually be the work of a group, composed of several of our collaborators and others.

The topics discussed will be drawn in the main from one or other of the following fields:

(1) The religious meaning of the experience through which we are passing.
(2) Moral and social problems created by the war.
(3) The outlook and problems of youth.
(4) The illumination of present events by the lessons of history.
(5) Constructive efforts which are helping to create a new order.
(6) The Church universal.
(7) Encroachments on religious and civil liberties.
(8) Motives and principles which make for a just and enduring peace.

You will see how large is the room for variety. There is little need to fear monotony.

A CO-OPERATIVE ENTERPRISE

We envisage the News-Letter as a co-operative enterprise. We have all much to learn from one another. I want to stress as strongly as I can this matter of mutual learning. There is bound to be the greatest diversity of outlook among our readers, not only in their understanding of Christianity but also in regard to the nature of modern society and the forces that are transforming it. The situation in which we find ourselves is so vast that none of us can see more than a little bit of it. The small groups which have been meeting in recent years and which I mentioned earlier have made an important discovery. It is that we often learn most from those whose point of view is very different from our own. The News-Letter may help our readers to share in this discovery. In learning from those whose experience and outlook are different from ours we transcend the limitations of our individuality and add to our stature.

I hope that readers will write to us freely, telling us what they like and dislike in the News-Letter, and what kind of help they want. Even if it is impossible with our present staff to answer or acknowledge all letters, we promise to do our best to read, digest and learn from them.

SUBSCRIPTION

The subscription rate is 10s. a year, 5s. 6d. for six months and 3s. for three months. Particulars will be found in the accompanying subscription form.

We shall keep a list of subscribers in duplicate in two different places, so that if our office is destroyed by a bomb we shall not lose track of our members.

If anything happens to me there are enough people to carry on. A. R. Vidler, the Warden of St. Deiniol's Library, who will be associated with me in the editorial task, will come to London for two days in the week, but he lives at Hawarden, near Chester, and the chances are small that we shall both be knocked out by the same air-raid!

THE NEXT ISSUE

The receipt of this issue of the News-Letter will be for most people the first announcement of its existence. In order to allow time for subscriptions to come in, the next issue will be published on November 1st. After that the News-Letter will appear weekly. If you want to receive the second number promptly your subscription should reach us within a week, i.e., by October 25th.

Some weeks must elapse before the News-Letter can fully unfold its character. In order that you may not miss this point, I will enforce it by a recollection from my early days when I lived in Scotland. There was a man in charge of a well-known mission who was believed to devote a large part of the week to preparing posters announcing his Sunday evening sermon. He announced on one occasion that his subject would be "The Past, Present and Future of God, the World and Humanity." When this story was told at a dinner party at which I was present an American guest was heard remarking to himself, "Well, at any rate there would be Hell left for him to preach about next Sunday." It is wise for an editor who is envisaging fifty-two issues to leave something for next time.

I came to the conclusion, and those of our collaborators whom I consulted agreed, that the best choice of an article for this first issue was one that explains what we understand by a "Christian" News-Letter. Some of you might have preferred a different type of article. That you shall have in succeeding issues. We are aiming at variety. But variety, as you will realise—one of our collaborators has impressed on me that we must pay strict attention to accuracy in the use of words—implies not one but several specimens. The next number will be quite different from this one.

The subject discussed in the next issue will be "What is God Doing?" That of the following number will be "Evacuation—a Social Landmark."

HOW YOU CAN HELP

If you are convinced that it is necessary in this emergency for us to pool our experience and thinking and to create a bond between those who, because they believe in God, are set on wresting good out of the present evil, will you become not a passive recipient but an active worker? Can you enlist the interest of your friends in this joint undertaking and promote discussion of the contents of the News-Letter? If in a multitude of centres throughout the country there begins an active canvassing of ideas leading to imaginative, constructive, practical effort, a new society will be coming to birth even in the throes of war.

In this hope,

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

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THE CHRISTIAN
NEWS-LETTER
OCTOBER 18TH 1939

The Supplement
No. 0

WHAT IS A "CHRISTIAN" NEWS-LETTER?

THIS question must be faced at the outset. Unless our answer to it is clear the News-Letter will only add to the present confusion. In the minds of many people a Christian attitude to the problems of society means little more than the addition of a religious flavour to generally accepted humanitarian standards and aspirations. The true answer goes much deeper.

DISTINGUISHING MARKS

The distinguishing marks of a Christian News-Letter are doubtless many. We limit ourselves here to three.

First, it must always reflect the acute *tension* between the world as it is and the new divine order which broke into the world in Christ.

AN ACT IN HISTORY

The central belief of Christianity is that God by an act in history inaugurated in Jesus Christ a new era in the life of mankind. This belief has a vital relation to our hopes that out of the present chaos some better order of society may come to birth. The forces of evil hold us to-day in so powerful a grasp that if all that we have to oppose to them is our human purposes, however well-intentioned, the odds must be terribly against us. Power that can change the world must have a more solid foundation than our own aspirations. Christianity turns our eyes from our own fitful purposes and fixes them on a reality other than ourselves. If the essential nature of reality is revealed in something that God has established in history, then the gates of hell cannot prevail against it.

A CONFUSED BATTLE-GROUND

The new order is already present, but its full realisation lies in the future. The life of the Christian on earth has to be lived within a society ruled by other presuppositions. He shares in its activities, and his actions are of necessity determined in part by its common purposes. It is in this society, with its conflicting impulses, its mixture of motives and its blundering and uncertain efforts to achieve the good, that the Christian in this earthly life has to fulfil his responsibility to God and his fellow-men. He knows that he is called to a new and distinctive way of life, but when he has to act in a given situation any one of the courses between which he has to choose, and even the one which he believes to be in the circumstances indubitably right, falls far short of the highest good. War is the extreme instance of this dilemma.

Never was there greater need of the Christian witness than in the situation in which we find ourselves. Just for that

reason it is extraordinarily difficult to know what that witness should be and how it can be made effective and creative. It is the task of a Christian News-Letter to probe this difficulty as deeply as possible, and to serve as a bond between those who are seeking an answer to it.

IDENTIFICATION WITH THE NATION

It is the responsibility of a Christian News-Letter to enter imaginatively into the ordeal through which the nation is passing. The bonds which unite those who speak the same speech, love the same countryside and city streets, share the same historical memories and the same ways of life are drawn closer in time of calamity. Suffused with a common feeling we know how dear is the land that gave us birth and how precious is the tradition of our island race with its love of liberty and the reign of law, its struggles for justice, its adventures and creative achievements, its poetry and laughter, its tolerance and human kindness. All this must be an undertone that colours whatever is written in this News-Letter.

THE BAR OF JUDGMENT

The loyalty of the Christian, however, is not to the nation as it is at any given moment but to the eternal values that have in some degree found embodiment in its historical life. To make the nation an end in itself is the Nazi religion. This form of idolatory is not confined to one people but has deep roots in the heart of man. The Church can never identify itself completely with the purposes of an unredeemed society. Its function is to bear witness to a truth and goodness that lie beyond any present attainment. It must bring all human aims and achievements to the bar of an absolute judgment. This service to the nation is never more needed than in time of war.

The nation has gone to war to rid the world of a force so sinister, evil and menacing as to make a humane social and international life impossible.

It is endeavouring to defend values that are essential to enable society to hold together. Morally there is a yawning gulf between Nazi aims and the ideals we profess, and this is a fact of capital importance.

But the religious view goes deeper. In the light of God's holy demands the difference between ourselves and those whom we are opposing is seen in relation to a more fundamental unity. There are many Germans who hate the evils we are resisting as much as we do. We who are championing the right are ourselves a sinful people, as individuals and as a nation. If our cause is just, who are we that we should be its defenders? The faults of our national policy contributed to the growth of Hitlerism. There are crying evils in our own society. We all alike have nothing to look to but the divine mercy. To know this is to know that we must forgive our enemies as we ourselves hope to be forgiven.

THE UNIVERSAL CHRISTIAN SOCIETY

A second distinguishing mark of a Christian News-Letter is that it will never lose sight of the universal character of the Christian society. The Christian Church transcends the bounds of nationality. Loyalty to the universal Church is for the Christian prior to loyalty to a national Church. Between the Christian witness to the unity of mankind as the object of God's creative and redeeming love and the deification of a local human community there is an irreconcilable opposition. One of the greatest services which Christians can render to their country and to mankind is to bring to human affairs that enlargement of understanding and

widening of sympathies which comes from conscious membership in a universal society.

MILITARISM DESTROYS—HOW CAN WE CREATE?

The third function of a Christian News-Letter is to fasten attention on the redemptive and constructive tasks that are possible even in time of war. War is in its essence destructive. Human energy is diverted from creative effort. The verdict of one of the ablest of living historians after surveying the whole of human history is that militarism is the almost invariable accompaniment of the breakdown of civilisations. If we fail to give heed to this solemn warning of history our civilisation is doomed. There is only one way in which to counter the danger to which the higher life of man is exposed by war. It is consciously and ardently to foster in ourselves, and to spread by contagion, the dispositions and virtues that make for the growth of the human spirit. It is idle to suppose that the qualities required to restore civilisation will be at our disposal when the war comes to an end unless they have already begun to refashion our minds and lives. We can hope for a new order after the war only if it is taking shape now.

It will be a main task of the News-Letter to encourage its readers by informing them about efforts of all kinds directed to this end.

NO WAY BACK

Few thoughtful people suppose that even if we win the war we can revert to our accustomed life. The existing order of things is at an end. We must be ready for a drastic transformation of ideas, values, relationships and social habit.

THE BLACK-OUT OF MIND

But it is not merely that the structure of society must inevitably change. The situation is more serious. Perhaps the greatest harm done by the Nazi regime has been the extent to which it has broken up independent centres of spiritual and social activity. The tendency of war conditions is to produce similar effects among ourselves. Evacuation, unless its problems are mastered by creative spiritual effort, is disruptive of family and neighbourhood. The moral disintegration caused by air-raids might well be more serious than the material damage and loss of life. Free speech and discussion are subject to restriction and may be further inhibited by lethargy, weariness, depression and despair. We are conscious of the dangers to life and limb from the black-out; a still greater peril of which we are less aware may be a black-out of mind. Not only does war take its toll of the best and bravest, but the pall of death may settle down on our whole civilisation.

BELIEF IN LIFE

But that is not, and for the Christian never can be, the last word. He puts his trust in a God who is the author and giver of *life*. 'In Him was life' are words that stand at the beginning of a book which tells us at its close that it was written that 'believing we may have life through His name.' Life, more life, is what we crave. The life of man expresses itself in thought, imagination, intercourse and community. A new order can be brought to birth only by a sustained effort of creative thought and action. The radical changes in our ways of life brought about by the war, while they impose heavy burdens, also provide new opportunities and give us the chance of learning to think, live and create in new ways. The function of a Christian News-Letter in

war time is to encourage the free exercise of the imagination and intelligence in relation to the issues with which we have to deal. The task to which we must all address ourselves is to strengthen in ourselves and others the belief in life. The destructive violence of war must be matched by an upsurge of spiritual energies directed to positive ends.

A DEDICATED BROTHERHOOD

The only force capable of bringing to birth a new society embodying enough of the Christian values to entitle it to be described as a new Christendom is that of alert, adventurous, disciplined men and women, delivered from anxiety about their personal future or immediate effectiveness and from dread of radical social change, and dedicated to the service of a society founded on Christian truth and justice. This deliverance from self-centredness and inhibition comes from a complete surrender to the will of God.

What holds us back more than anything else is fear—fear not only of death but of life.

Christianity offers us freedom from fear through the assurance that God is working out his purposes in history even though they are hidden from our eyes, that the forces of truth and goodness are more real, and in the long run more powerful, than those of evil, and that our individual lives are in the keeping of a Power whom we can absolutely trust. Our hope is that the News-Letter may serve as a means of communication between those who are reaching out after this way of life.

All communications and subscriptions should be sent to—

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